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# KATEKŌMEN

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*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without  
wavering. — Hebrews 10:4*

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THE JOURNAL OF  
GREENVILLE PRESBYTERIAN  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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# WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE FORGIVING?

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By Rev. Daniel Wilson

Sometimes, I find driving by the rules of the road tedious and frustrating. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been late for an appointment, when it seems that every traffic light is red and there are incompetent drivers at every round-a-bout? In such frustrating moments, I have often felt like ignoring the rules of the road. I felt like blasting straight through the red lights or going the wrong way around the round-a-bouts! But, what would happen if I took such risks? At the very least, I would endanger myself and others on the road, but I could seriously hurt or kill someone! Even if I didn't hurt anyone, I would be breaking the law, and I don't think the police would respond kindly to my excuse. "Sorry, officer, I just didn't feel like stopping..." I don't believe any law-abiding officer or judge would ever allow my "feelings" as a valid reason for breaking the law.

All of us readily admit that our feelings don't allow us to steal, speed, or murder. However, I fear we often use our feelings as an acceptable excuse to ignore our duty before God. How many times have you and I neglected private or family Bible reading because we didn't "feel" like it? We all have been lazy or negligent in spiritual duties at one time or another, but do we really think that the Judge of heaven and earth will just let our disobedience slide *because of our feelings*? And while breaking the law doesn't *necessarily* jeopardise our citizenship in this world (or in God's kingdom), we will certainly face consequences when we disobey.<sup>1</sup> The same is true when we neglect to do our duty regarding forgiveness: there are consequences, for us and others.

We began this series by defining God's forgiveness, which helped us define how *we* are to forgive. Last month, we expanded on that definition to describe the basic practice of forgiveness: from covering in love to confronting our brother. But, what if you don't *feel* like forgiving? Is that a valid reason to withhold forgiveness?

It can be very difficult to forgive someone who has sinned against you. Even in relatively small matters, it can be quite hard to let your feelings of frustration, hurt and bitterness go. The more grievous the offense, the more likely you are to question the offender's repentance and motives. You may feel like making him prove his sincerity. The more grievous the offense, the more people will naturally understand (and excuse) your unwillingness to forgive. In fact, with more grievous offenses, many psychologists and even pastors believe that forgiveness is optional. But as God's people, we dare not rest on the feelings which come naturally or on what most experts think.<sup>2</sup> Rather, we must look to God's Word to define our duty and practice regarding forgiveness.

In Luke 17:1-10, Jesus teaches, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.*" In those words, Jesus sums up the process that we already looked at briefly last time. But, He doesn't stop there. Jesus proceeds to define what **HE** means by "*if he repents.*" He doesn't explain that we only forgive when we see "true repentance" (which most people define as fruits of repentance, changed actions, true remorse, etc.). No, far from giving such stipulations, Jesus says something radically different, "*If he sins against you **seven** times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and **says**, 'I repent,' **forgive** him.*" (emphasis mine) Jesus really raises the stakes by putting His instructions in the context of a seven time repeat offender. Even more striking, Jesus says, if he comes back **SEVEN** times in the same day and **SAYS**, "I repent," then we are to forgive him.<sup>3</sup> A person doesn't have time to sincerely change or show true remorse if he is offending/repenting 7 times in a day. It just isn't possible. Therefore, we must forgive the one who offends us when he asks, not when he can prove he means it. We must forgive, even when we doubt his sincerity, and trust me, after 4 or 5 times in the same day, we would all definitely doubt an offender's sincerity!

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<sup>1</sup> God gave the law to prevent such consequences. In fact, God gave His redeemed people the Law so that through serving Him, it might go well with them in the land He gave them (Deuteronomy 6:1-3, 17-18).

<sup>2</sup> John 8:31-47, 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, and Ephesians 2:1-10 clarify that what comes naturally to mankind is not honouring to God.

<sup>3</sup> The number seven is the biblical number of perfection. So, we aren't given permission to withhold forgiveness the 8<sup>th</sup> time a person commits the same offense. In fact, I believe Jesus' answer in Matthew 18:21-22 was in response to this very discussion.

Now, this does NOT mean that sinners can just commit offenses seven times a day and get away with it because they say, "I repent." *Not at all!* This passage is primarily intended to define what God requires of us in forgiveness, not to give excuses to the unrepentant. Many other passages define repentance and consequences for sin. Psalm 51 and Isaiah 55:6-9 define repentance as being a change of the mind, the attitude (emotions), and the will. Biblical repentance involves recognising sin as sin, changing your attitude toward that sin from desire to remorse, and turning from that sin to new obedience in Christ. In Luke 17, Jesus is teaching that we cannot stop to evaluate the quality of one's repentance before granting forgiveness.

Like many of us, the disciples reacted incredulously to this, saying, "*Increase our faith!*" They understood what Jesus was saying, and they thought, "We need more faith before we can obey that command." But, Jesus refused to allow the "not enough faith" argument to stand. Jesus rebuked them by pointing out that it only took faith the size of a mustard seed to uproot trees and throw them into the sea. What Jesus meant was that if you have any faith at all, you can obey His command about forgiveness. He proceeded in verses 7-10 to prove that such forgiveness is our duty before God. There Jesus described the situation of a servant who had been working all day ploughing or looking after sheep. When he came in from the field, the master would never allow the servant to sit down and relax and eat. Instead, the master requires the servant to prepare his food, and then serve it to him. Only after the master has eaten may the servant eat and relax, and he is due no extra thanks or praise for this patient service – he has only done his duty. In fact, to neglect that duty in any way would be sinning against the master. It is easy to simply pass over that account as unimportant, and yet Jesus was pressing His disciples (and us) to understand that our duty is more important than our feelings. Imagine if you were that servant – having to cook for and serve your master after a hard day's work in the field... every feeling in you would be screaming, "Forget the Master, and serve myself first – I did all the hard work today – **I deserve** to eat first..." But, the servant's duty to his master is more important, and that is what Jesus wants us to understand about forgiveness as well. Forgive whether you feel like it or not, because if you refuse, you are sinning against *your* Master, God.

You might reply, "Ok, I see your point, but what about situations of rape and incest? Surely Jesus would make exceptions for extreme situations, right?" You may even be thinking, "Requiring forgiveness in cases of abuse/rape is belittling the seriousness of the situation!" It is never good to belittle sin, and that is why such replies are so dangerous. For they misunderstand the danger and implications of sinfully withholding forgiveness. We must not lose the Biblical perspective; God's perspective is more important than our personal preference. In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches that it is not the seriousness of *the sin committed against you* that is most important; rather, it is more important to understand the seriousness of ***your sin before God*** and the seriousness of ***the sin of withholding forgiveness!***

In Matthew 18, we find the parable of the unmerciful servant. There, Jesus describes a king's servant who owed his master 10,000 talents. The king forgave this debt, but then the unmerciful servant went and refused to forgive the debt of a fellow servant which was only a hundred denarii. When the king heard about it, he was furious and handed that servant over to the jailers (literally torturers) until he paid back all he owed. And Jesus concluded that parable with these words, "*This is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*" There are a few important elements to this story, which we must understand. *Firstly*, Jesus is speaking to the disciples and speaking about servants of the king – so, He is talking about what our heavenly Father will do to believers if they refuse to forgive. *Secondly*, the margins of your Bible probably say that the comparison of debts is millions to a few dollars. That is a correct scale between the two amounts, but it belittles the smaller debt.<sup>4</sup> The average wage for a day's labour was one denarii. This means that the 100 denarii was not a small debt. It was roughly 1/3 of a year's income. If the average Modern worker makes \$30-\$45,000 a year, then we are talking about a debt of \$10-15,000. That is no small debt. That is a debt big enough to hurt quite a bit. So, Jesus doesn't intend to belittle the offense committed by the second servant. He only intends to direct us to understand the enormous debt that God has forgiven us, and how His forgiveness should lead us to show that same mercy to others! They may not *deserve* to be forgiven, but neither do you! *Furthermore*, by refusing to forgive, the unmerciful servant (the original offended party in this case) **becomes the abuser** by choking and imprisoning his fellow servant! In this, Jesus proves the necessity for

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<sup>4</sup> A talent was 6,000 times bigger than a denarii. So, a talent would be about 19 years labour, which means that 10,000 talents would be essentially an infinite debt!

believers to dutifully forgive, lest they be handed over to the torturers until they pay their own debt.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is not being harsh in these verses; rather, He is warning us that refusing to biblically forgive leads to the torturous prison of bitterness. All who are injured by grievous sin need this truth of Jesus to set them free (both offenders and offended). We need to understand that we become the offending party when we refuse to have a forgiving spirit, and that deadly unmerciful sin will harm us spiritually, emotionally and possibly even physically.

Jesus teaches that God requires forgiveness. We must cover offenses in love, or confront the offender in love – either way, God requires that we graciously offer to pardon those who sin against us, and to pursue reconciliation as far as it depends upon *us*. Since God’s forgiveness is a promise and not a feeling, we **can** obey Him even when everything in us is screaming otherwise. Far from being a harsh requirement, God desires to see both sinners and those sinned against delivered from the bondage of sin, bitterness and fear. The peace and joy of God cannot be separated from His view of forgiveness. It is much like being tempted by some object of lust/covetousness. That object is so appealing, and nearly everything in us is calling for us to indulge our craving. But God commands us to reject those feelings and emotions. Instead we must recognise that the house of the wayward woman leads to death and that covetousness kills.<sup>6</sup> God’s perspective may go against the grain at times, but His way saves from the certain pain, suffering and death that sin always brings! Likewise, we must understand that while it is immensely appealing to withhold forgiveness, that sin will bring more pain and suffering to you than God’s way of forgiveness. It ultimately comes down to a matter of trust. Who do you trust more? You and your emotions and preferences? Or the infinite, eternal God, whose thoughts are light-years above yours?<sup>7</sup>

In this brief series, we have defined forgiveness and wrestled with many aspects of this very difficult topic. However, we have not covered every possible angle. Lord willing, in a few months, I plan to write one more article in a question and answer format to fill in the remaining gaps. Perhaps, you still have unanswered questions. If so, please write me an email or letter, and I will do my best to either answer you personally or address your question in the final article.<sup>8</sup> Until then, I commend two worthwhile books to you: Chris Brauns’ book *Unpacking Forgiveness*, and Jay Adams’ *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. May God sanctify us to reflect His mercy in Christ by the way we forgive others!

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<sup>5</sup> Read Chris Brauns’ helpful treatment of this in his book: *Unpacking Forgiveness*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 119-128.

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 5,6,7 and Romans 7.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9.

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